

REVIEW GUIDE FOR THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, was the dominant intellectual movement of the eighteenth century.

The achievements of the Scientific Revolution had revealed the ability of the human mind to penetrate the secrets of the physical universe. While the makers of the Scientific Revolution had used their intellectual powers to discover the natural laws that governed the operation of the physical universe, the thinkers of the Enlightenment sought through reasoning to discover the natural laws that governed the affairs of human beings and human society. They criticized the existing institutions of absolute monarchy and established church and proposed a broad range of reforms designed to eliminate abuses and to promote individual freedom.

The Philosophes

While the Enlightenment was a broad international movement, many of its leading thinkers were French. The Enlightenment thinkers are known collectively as philosophes, the French word for philosophers. In fact, the philosophes were not philosophers in the traditional sense. Instead, they were critics of the Old Regime who developed new ideas about government, economics, and religion and advanced proposals for the improvement of the human condition and the reform of society.

The philosophes shared the Enlightenment's faith in the supremacy of human reason, believing that people, through the use of their reason, could find answers to their questions and solutions to their problems. In particular, reason could be used to reveal the natural laws that regulated human affairs. Once these natural laws were discovered, the institutions of society could be reformed to bring them more in accordance with the natural order. In brief, the philosophes were social critics, mainly French, but not exclusively so, who subjected human behavior and social institutions to the critical test of reason. *Sapere aude* ("dare to know") was their motto. As fighters for liberal thought and freedom in political, social, and economic spheres (*laissez faire*), they did not always agree with one another.

NOTED PHILOSOPHES

Voltaire (1694-1778)

In politics, Voltaire was a proponent of enlightened despotism and conducted a correspondence with Frederick the Great of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia (see Chapter 9). Enlightened despotism involved the idea that an absolute ruler would use his authority to promote reform. While some monarchs did in fact promote reforms designed to make their governments more efficient, even the most enlightened ruler could not contemplate, much less enact, any reforms that would serve to undermine his absolute authority. Beyond that, the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 brought terror to rulers in all lands, and they became adamant in their opposition to even moderate reforms, lest the floodgates of revolutionary upheaval be opened.

Adam Smith (1723-1790)

Smith, a Scottish economist, was the eighteenth century's most influential advocate of *laissez-faire*. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith attacked mercantilist doctrine and practice. A nation's wealth, he contended, was based on its production of goods by its farmers, artisans, and factory workers. Mercantilist regulations interfered with production and thereby restricted the expansion of a nation's wealth. Smith believed that people should be free to pursue their own economic self-interest. Each individual's pursuit of economic self-interest in a free economy would promote the prosperity of the entire society. Instead of regulating economic activity, the government should restrict its role to protecting the life, liberty, and property of its citizens. The state should content itself with being a passive policeman.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

The Social Contract (1762), Rousseau's treatise on politics and government, opens with the words: "All men are born free, but everywhere they are in chains." Although government

restricted individual freedom, it was nevertheless a necessary evil. There would be less evil, however, if government and individual liberty could be reconciled. In an effort to promote this reconciliation, Rousseau advocated a radical form of the contract theory of government. Rejecting the extreme individualism emphasized by many of his fellow philosophes, Rousseau stressed the role of the individual as a member of society. The social contract that he proposed was a contract in which the members of society agreed to be ruled by their general will. Although Rousseau never made it clear how the general will would operate in actual practice, he believed that all members of society would participate in the formulation of the general will, which would then be executed by a small group. Convinced that the general will is always right, Rousseau contended that obedience to the general will is an act of freedom. Rousseau himself did not actually favor democracy, in the modern sense of the term, but his view of the general will-and particularly the idea that ultimately sovereignty resides with all the people-helped promote the development of the democratic ideology.

Montesquieu (1689-1755)

In *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Montesquieu set forth the concept of the separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the government. This division of authority, with its checks and balances, would place effective limits on the power of the executive and thereby protect the rights of the individual citizens. Montesquieu's ideas influenced the writers of the American Constitution, as well as of the French Constitution of 1791.

Denis Diderot (1713-1784)

Virtually all of the important French philosophes, including Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, were among the some 160 contributors to the *Encyclopedia*, edited by Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (1717-1783). The *Encyclopedia* was both a compendium of knowledge and a means for spreading the philosophes' often radical ideas on government, economics, religion, philosophy, and other subjects. Despite the opposition of state and church authorities, the first twenty-eight volumes of the *Encyclopedia* were published between 1751 and 1772, and five additional volumes appeared in 1776-1777.

Beccaria (1738-1794)

In their criticism of the Old Regime, the philosophes were particularly outspoken in their condemnation of outmoded and unjust laws and systems of justice, especially the use of torture and capital punishment. In his *Essay on Crimes and Punishments* (1764), Cesare Beccaria, an Italian aristocrat, advanced his proposals for bringing law and justice into conformity with the rational laws of nature. Barbarous punishments, he believed, failed to deter crimes; the certainty of punishment was a far more effective deterrent than its severity. He believed further that justice should be swift and that punishment should focus on the rehabilitation of the criminal.

David Hume (1711-1776)

Hume tried to define good and evil in pragmatic terms. He argued that social utility should become the standard for public morality.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

The sharpest challenge to Rousseau's widely shared attitude toward women came only in 1792, with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Inspired by the French Revolution's doctrine of natural rights, this spirited writer deplored the fact that society kept women (in her words)frivolous, artificial, weak, and in a perpetual state of childhood. While men praised women for their beauty and grace, they hypocritically condemned them for a concern with vanity, fashion, and trivial matters, yet refused to treat them as rational human beings who could contribute to society as much as men. Her book emphasized the need for educational reform that would allow women to develop agile bodies and strong minds. Along the way Wollstonecraft took particular aim at Rousseau's *Emile*.